

Jovan Popovski (1916-2012)

## **How the Bulgars stole the Sacred items and Holy books from Ohrid during the 1916 occupation of Macedonia**





Above: The Holy Gospel and precious Mitra<sup>1</sup> crown of St. Clement Ohridski that was stolen from the house of the custodian Philipče family in Ohrid

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitre>

Valuable artifacts have long been pillaged from Macedonian cities, churches, monasteries, and spread all over the world. Today we can find them in museums or private collections in New York, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Belgrade, Athens, Thessaloniki, Sofia, Zagreb, and so on. But one of the worst episodes in this avail happened during the Bulgar occupation in 1916.

When in the 1915 Bulgar army approached Ohrid, the most aware and prominent citizens ran to the churches to shelter what they could shelter in front of the imminent arrival of the occupiers. The people of Ohrid hoped that the precious sacred items were taken in a safe places and that no one would hand them over to the Bulgars. However, in the following criminal action of the Bulgar forces, secretly and quickly, were stolen dozens of precious items of unestimated value from the Ohrid churches. Together with the occupational troops the then Bulgar bishop Boris came to Ohrid, with one task – to discover and stole as much as he can of the hidden precious objects from the Macedonian cultural past, and to take them to Sofia.

Realizing that the Macedonians have sheltered the precious items, the Bulgar bishop took harsh action and rushed to discover and stole the sacred objects, books and jewels, from Ohrid, including the precious crown of St. Clement, more than 11 centuries old.. For that purpose, he organized a secret network of his informants and a task force for looking, with torture and coercion, where and who of the citizens in Ohrid holds the hidden manuscripts and other precious specimens of historical and cultural value. By gathering data in this way, he compiled a list of about 80 valuable items. To find them all, the Bulgar bishop called for help the Bulgar occupational forces in Ohrid. The Bulgar soldiers sealed the city and started with systematic search.

Of course, this lasted for months, and the action started from the house of the most prominent Ohrid priest, George Ikonov, where the bishop Boris, colonel Peshinov, his aide, lieutenant Najdanov, lieutenant Mihov, an officer of the 23rd Infantry Regiment and a senior of the brigade, Lieutenant Tsekov.

Colonel Peshinov immediately informed them that *"they have heard that in the house there are great valuables of historical significance, such as the Shroud of Andronicus Palaeologus and the Chronicle of Jovan Skilica."* Since the paralyzed priest Ikonov couldn't "help" in the search, colonel Peshinov immediately ordered the senior sergeant of the 23rd Regiment Ivan Bežlev, who was also accompanied by them, to forcibly open all the coffins and closets in the house.

In the first attempt, only the Chronicle of Skilica was found. The search continued in the next house, of the Sprostranov, who, in the end, was forced to talk, and he told that the Sacred Shroud was into the priest's house. And indeed, after the second raid the colonel Peshinov found it there and took it. In the following days, the Bulgar bishop and his army if thieves stole everything they could from the houses of the custodians and prominent citizens of Ohrid, every precious religious item, and then with a special convoy, they shipped them directly to Sofia – the chronicle of Jovan Skilica from the 13th century, together with the Shroud from the church of St. Mother of God Perivlepta, given to them by emperor Theodore Komnenus. When everything that had been found was collected, and after the withdrawal of the Bulgar occupational army from



Macedonia, the bishop Boris destroyed the entire archive and proofs in relation with his act of vandalism.

However, some documents remained, in the form of a copy of the document, confirming and testifying the looting of the Bulgar occupational forces in 1916.



## Documented robbery

The document confirming the robbery of the Bulgar occupational army in 1916 was found in 1967 in Ohrid. The document was accidentally found by Jovan Popovski, doyen of the Macedonian journalism. In his memoirs, he noted that 45 years ago, in front of a neighborhood bakery in Ohrid, he was waiting to buy a bagel: *"I spotted some documents with which the baker was folding the pretzels, and they immediately attracted my attention. While waiting for my turn, I flipped through some of the papers and, to my great surprise, discovered a historical document from the time of the Bulgar occupation of Ohrid in 1916. The document was in fact a list of great artistic, historical and ecclesiastical treasures, which were stolen by the Bulgar army in and around the city, and taken to Sofia. I asked the baker if I could take the paper, and he told me I could take them all if I wanted, he has piles of them, he uses them to light the oven. I took the document and later carefully reviewed it. It was an authentic list of valuables that the Bulgar bishop Boris had stole and sent to Sofia. I took the original to the Ohrid Archive, thinking that I had no right to take such a valuable document to my home. Of course, before, I carefully copied it by hand word for word. Unfortunately, now that transcript of mine is the "original", because later when I asked for the document in the Archive, it was no longer there."*

According to Popovski's document, about eighty valuables were taken from Ohrid alone, including the crown of St. Clement, which to this day is in the "temporary custody" in Sofia,





Bulgaria. The document, signed by the commission for "robbery" at the end of the almost year-long search for the Ohrid treasures, reads: *"Today, November 28, 1916, based on the telegram from 9 p.m. under number 17762, of the Prime Minister, Dr. Radoslavov, this act was drawn up for the collected packed and sent for temporary storage in Sofia, down-appointed church antiquities, property of the city of Ohrid ... "*

Immediately afterwards, all the antiquities taken from Ohrid were listed, including such valuables, which are worth a fortune. Thus, by order of the then Bulgar PM, and organized by the Bulgar bishop Boris, among other things, the “ – *Icon of Christ the Savior, a gift from the Ohrid Archbishop Dimitrij of the 13th century; – An inscription on a bronze plaque by Procopius, Archbishop of Justiniana Prima; – Shroud of Andronicus Palaeologus, collected from the Church of St. Clement; – Silver box with the relics of Saint Mother of God; – Silver Cross from 1742; – Two covers, a gift from Duka Komnenus; – The Chronicle of Jovan Skilica from the 13th century; – Old gospel with the image of St. Clement; – Twenty old Macedonic manuscripts; – One imprecised silver icon made in relief, – and a total of 84 other separate objects.*” Of



course, among all these precious things, taken from Ohrid, are the golden crown of St. Clement with enamel and cross, as well as his ivory scepter with a snake. At the end of the document it is stated that *"the act was compiled and signed by those present in four copies: one for the Minister-President Radoslavov, for the Ohrid District Headquarters, for the Holy Ohrid Metropolitanate and for the National Museum in Sofia."* The document was signed by the Petrov

District Chief, the Bulgar Metropolitan Boris, the District Chief Petar Chaule, the Secretary of the District Headquarters, Oggenov, and the Ohrid citizen Sardzov.

One of the four copies of this document is the sheet of paper that Jovan Popovski has discovered in an Ohrid bakery in 1967. *"Only one of all the things taken from Ohrid, the Shroud of Andronicus Palaeologus before the Second World War, was published in a professional magazine in Sofia,"* – Popovski told us in conversations we had with him several times in the last two years before his death. *"All other things,"* he said, *"are still in "temporary custody" in Sofia to this day"*. And not only are they kept, but so far none of it has been presented to the public, as if they were still afraid that someone would immediately ask them to return them to where they were stolen from ninety years ago. With this unscrupulous theft, carried out by order of the Bulgar government and by the bishop Boris, who due to the resistance of the people of Ohrid to hand over that precious treasure, called for help the army, which tortured even seriously ill people, such as The priest George Ikononov managed to discover and take away the really valuable, perhaps the most



valuable things that the people of Ohrid kept for centuries and there was never a need for someone to "temporarily keep them" so that they would not be taken away.

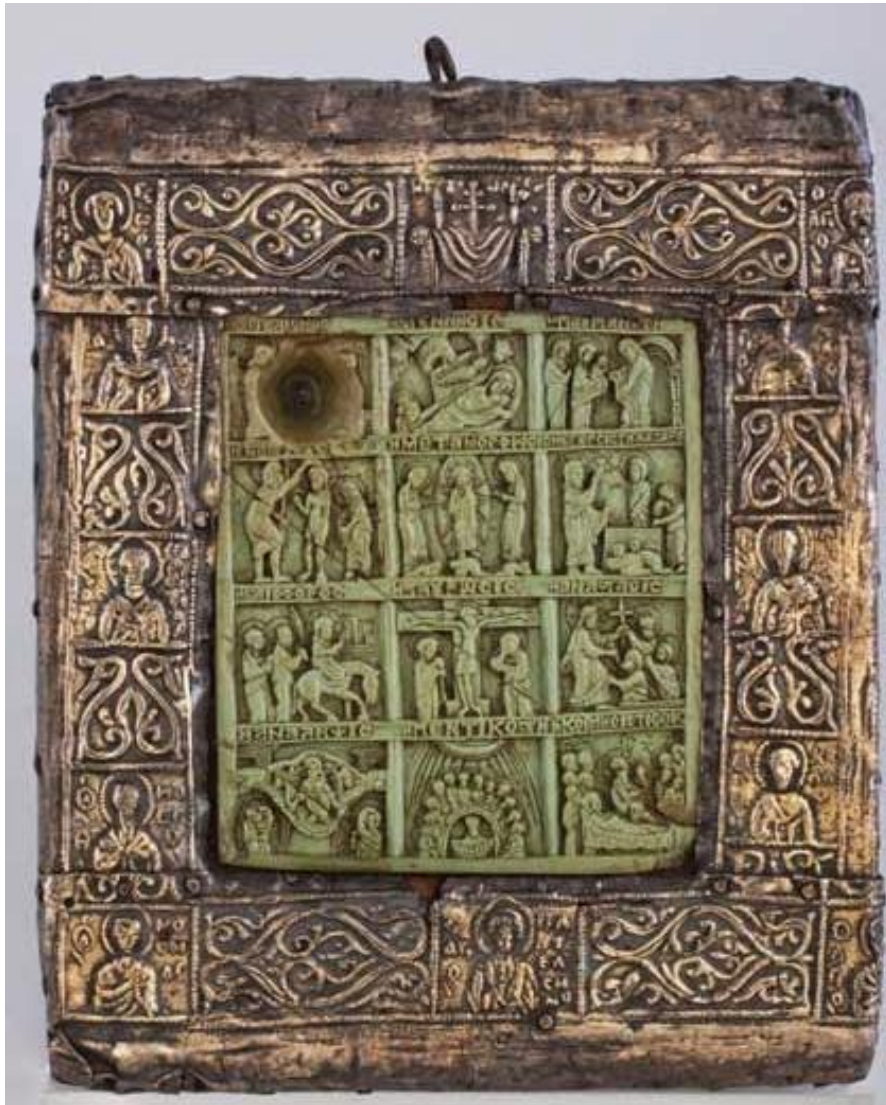
This "temporary storage" of Ohrid valuables in Sofia has been going on for more than 100 years, so it's finally time, at least for the near future, to activate the document confirming that all items will be returned to Macedonia, from where they were taken "only" for "temporary storage"... *"Since it is an official document of the Bulgar government, i.e. state," Popovski said, "the Macedonian government directly, but also through international institutions, if necessary, should only demand that the document be respected and that the Golden Crown and the scepter of St. Clement be returned to Ohrid., along with all other valuables and manuscripts, taken to Bulgaria in the winter of 1916."*



According to Popovski's records, most of the items taken from Ohrid are now in the vault of the National Museum in Sofia, and he secretly, through friends, managed to photograph the crown of St. Clement: *"In the late sixties of the last century,"* remembered Popovski, *"I talked to the then judge of the Supreme Court of Macedonia, Stavre Philipče, who told me that the crown of St. Clement in Ohrid was presented to the people only on the feast of St. Clement, and then went from house to house. The precious crown of St. Clement, the Bulgar bishop Boris, colonel Peshinov, his adjutant Najdanov, lieutenant Mihov and senior police investigator Cekov, a robbery gang formed to seize the Ohrid treasure, found the crown of St. Clement in 1916 in the house of Philipče. "Glad to finally have Clementa's crown, they have compiled a list and sent the items with a strong military escort to Sofia, where they are to this day,"* said Popovski, who recalled that in 1968, a year after accidentally found the document on the confiscated valuables



in Ohrid, had a meeting with Krste Crvenkovski, then president of the Central Committee of the SCM (Assembly of the Communists of Macedonia), wanting to interest him to initiate the return of all confiscated items in Macedonia, including the precious crown of St. Clement. According to



Popovski, the president of the communists of Macedonia just waved his hand and said: "*We have had enough quarrels with the Bulgars.*" But why quarrels, when there is a document that the items were taken for "temporary storage"?

However, since then, as far as is known to the public, not one Macedonian government has initiated a procedure for returning the sacred items and holy books stolen from Ohrid, although it has every right to this is because there is a document and a conclusion of the Bulgar government that all items will be returned immediately after the end of the 1st World War. According to the signatures of the document, it is clear that the military also took part in the operation to seize everything valuable in Ohrid, which means that no items were handed over voluntarily, as some Bulgar historians claim, even saying that "*many Ohrid residents were happy to give away their belongings and books.*"

## **The bishop Boris was an ordinary robber**

The Bulgar bishop Boris, who came to Ohrid in 1915, together with the Bulgar army, knew well that Ohrid was not a Bulgar but a Macedonian ancient city, so he immediately transferred the precious wealth stolen from the people of Ohrid by a military convoy to Sofia, where still kept in the secret vaults of the National Museum. Due to his merits in connection with the robbery of Ohrid, as the journalist, publicist and writer Jovan Popovski said, bishop Boris after the 1st World War, that is, after returning to Sofia as a man who robbed Ohrid, was immediately appointed Secretary of the Exarchate to Constantinople. But because he knew how to steal, and he probably enjoyed it, in a few months he managed to steal a whole million Levs from the church treasury. After the theft was discovered, Boris was demoted and sent to the Bachkovski Monastery in Bulgaria, where he died.

**Why should Macedonia demand the return of the crown and scepter of St. Clement?**



According to academician Dr. Georgi Pop-Atanasov<sup>2</sup>, St. Clement is one of the most prominent students and collaborators of the Macedonic and all-Slavic educators Cyril and Methodius, as he was born in Macedonia in the 30's of the 9th century. As it is known, he accompanies the Holy Brothers in their Moravian Mission, and actively participated in the church-educational activity that they performed during their stay in the kingdom of Great Moravia. After the collapse of the mission and the death of Archbishop Methodius in AD 885, Clement, together with Naum and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://manu.academia.edu/GeorgiPopAtanasov>

Angelarius, returned to the Macedonians in his homeland, and continued the enlightening mission of his teachers, Saints Cyril and Methodius. After a short stay in the Bulgar capital Pliska, St. Clement came back to Macedonia, where he founded the Ohrid Literary School. In the area of Kutmičevica, with the main centers Devol, Ohrid and Glavinica, where he stayed for almost 30 years, first as a teacher until AD 893, and then as the first bishop who preached and served in the Macedonian language for 23 years. Apart from his educational and church-pastoral activity, Saint Clement of Ohrid was extremely active in the field of literary creation, so he is one of the founders of Macedonian literature. Almost eleven centuries after his death, the renovation of his university in Ohrid began, and that is another reason for the current Bulgar government, which through the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced a new page in the Macedonian-Bulgar relations, to finally correct the crime from 1916 of the Prime Minister Radoslavov, and to return in Ohrid, where they belong, the crown and scepter of St. Clement, and other stolen items. In Ohrid, in the church named after St. Clement, and the complex of St. Clement's University, which is being rebuilt around it, it will be possible for all who will visit this cult place of St. Clement's to see an authentic church on the shore above Lake Ohrid, the same place where St. Clement himself welcomed them more than 1100 years ago.

Sources:

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## **Robberies of the Bulgar army during the occupation in Aegean Macedonia**

The article in "Kathimerini" has already been reported in the Bulgar media, and the religious portal Dveri.bg has already started reacting to the readers there.

The eyes of the Greek public began to turn to this problem when in the United States, specifically at Princeton University and some libraries, began to appear a dozen unique church manuscripts from the 10th century, which are known to have been stolen from the monasteries in the Aegean Macedonia. The article states that *"it is not clear how they got to the United States after being stolen by the Bulgar occupiers."*

*"Our priority now is to return the manuscripts from the United States, and for that purpose we will hire a law firm in New York,"* announced Metropolitan Paul of Drama.

### **The Greek newspaper also reminds of the period in which the thefts took place**

– During the 1st World War, specifically in 1917, the Bulgar army engaged in looting and, among other things, stripped the Macedonian churches and monasteries, the monastery "Kosinica" (which was renamed "*Ikosifinisa*" by the Greek occupiers), the monastery "St. John the Forerunner" above Ser, and others in the Xanthi region. They take from them church books, icons, manuscripts, everything that is estimated to have historical and spiritual value. The Bulgar side initially did not admit to owning the relics, but then they began to appear in museum exhibitions and libraries. Greek specialists managed to identify the stolen items and since then have periodically initiated the issue of their return – the newspaper said.

### **A question that is being avoided...**

This issue is initiated in the period when the two countries, Yunanistan and Bulgaristan (Greece and Bulgaria), establish intensive interstate communication and emphasize the good relations. Therefore, the newspaper estimates, this issue is not on the agenda.

*"Sofia opposes without clear arguments, and Athens does not put the issue on the agenda in the diplomatic dialogue between the two countries so as not to spoil the traditionally excellent bilateral relations between the two sides,"* Kathimerini said, adding that the Bulgar side stated in backstage talks that *"It fears the political cost and the reactions of nationalist circles who believe that the relics were taken from the Bulgar country, which they consider eastern Macedonia and Thrace, in order to be saved."*

The Bulgar portal "Dveri" for its part reminds that in 1915 Bulgaria joined the 1st World War on the side of the Central Powers, and occupied the territories of present-day Macedonia, Kosovo and northern Greece. The following year, the director of the National Museum in Sofia, Bogdan Filov, wrote a letter to the military expressing concern about the possibility of artillery shells destroying cultural monuments, which were then sent to the National Museum. *"These are*

*monuments from the Bulgar(?) Archbishopric in Ohrid, from the monasteries near Serres and Drama and from the monastery "Dečani" in Kosovo. After the war, in accordance with the Treaty of Ney, Bulgaria was obliged to return the rescued valuables, but Bulgaria waived that obligation or fulfilled it only partially," the portal reminds.*

### **Hypocritical "good neighborly" policy**

The “*Greeks*”, of course, now believe that the church treasure in Aegean Macedonia, including the two monasteries, is “*Greek*” in accordance with their thesis that Macedonia is “*Greek*”. Unlike them, the Bulgars consider the treasures to be theirs because Macedonia has a Bulgar history. By the way, the iconostasis in one of the two churches was created by the Filipov family, from the Debar region, so it is no wonder that Tirana has the right to lay claim to it too.

This problem gives a clear picture of the alleged “good neighborliness” between Grease and Bulgaria, as well as the hypocritical policy of Bulgaria towards its neighbors - one attitude towards the Republic of Macedonia, another, subservient and servile towards Grease. As it is



known, Bulgaria reacts fiercely when in this part of Macedonia someone qualifies it as an occupier in the two world wars and considers it as anti-Bulgar propaganda. As can be seen, her mouth is sewn with silk thread when the “*Greeks*” do the same, so it turns out that they have no problem with being occupiers in Aegean Macedonia, but they have a problem with not being occupiers in the other 38 percent of ethnic Macedonia, which today do not belong to either Athens or Sofia. When it comes to the “*Greeks*”, even their snitches, who worked specifically on the Macedonian issue, are silent. Otherwise, according to Brussels, what is happening between

the two countries is probably good neighborliness, which raises the question of what they want from us then?

### **The iconostasis of Petre Philipovski-Garkata**

In the archives for the monastery St. Bogorodica-Kosinica there is information that the author of his iconostasis, which is characterized by extraordinary beauty, is the work of the Debar carving family Filipov, headed by the famous Petre Filipov-Garkata. The monastery is believed that it was founded in 518 by the monk German, and its second founder was the Ecumenical Patriarch Dionis.

Bulgar sources state that at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century he "*was one of the centers of Hellenism in eastern Macedonia and contributed to the active Hellenization of the local Bulgars*".

Branko Gjorgjevski

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